

Port Aransas on Mustang Island in the Gulf draws my pal and me each October and each April for a fall and a spring celebration. Right at 400 miles from Mertzon, we descend from 2500 feet altitude to zero sea level to forsake such life-savoring experiences as autumn heifer calving and dry spring bovine prickly pear cactus feasting.

Several things take time to adjust to, like switching to slick-soled shoes to be able to make smoother turns in the sand and surer stops at water line. Shoe soles in the shortgrass country require wide cleats for traction in prairie dust and needlegrass fodder.

Beach hikes over brown fronds of seaweeds, or among white gull feathers, or over mounds from crab holes are much different than a stroll in the shortgrass country dodging cocklebur bush, ducking mesquite limbs, or side-stepping badger holes.

Footprints in the sands show much more depth than in the rockier, clay and caliche-based soils of the West. Each visit, the trailheads passing through the dunes to the beach show deeper impressions in the sand. Deep signs translated from ranch to beach lingo by spotting "old four-toes' path," or seeing where "old slewfoot" veered off the trail.

Apparent changes today, too, are bigger imprints left from the larger beach towels that sunbathers unfold to sit upon. Packed sand also sculpts – or better, records – posterior prints big as the seat of a captain's chair, a big captain's chair.

Before becoming accustomed to the changes, I thought a walrus or sea lion might be beached on a Saturday afternoon. But after the first weekend crowds swarmed into town, it became obvious that folks were weighing in on the high side on the Coast, as they were further inland.

The shock caused reexamination of my beach costume. I'd dropped 6.5 ounces by rigorous fasting back at the ranch to keep from buying new bathing trunks to replace the pair bought summer before last at the Christians in Action store in Angelo.

Before leaving, I fasted to be sure to stay sleek. I didn't have to step on the scales. I can always tell by checking how easy the suit slips on past my hind legs how much I've gained.

Bright green must be the most popular color in men's bathing suits, as in the past 30 years I've had four "Stretch Fab" brands, all green. All shrunk up too tight to slip on in close quarters, or in a public dressing room. Not one of the suits faded, but the one laid to dry on the

propane tank at the ranch took on streaks of aluminum paint across the legs to become a circus costume or a movie prop for a frogman.

Friday, or perhaps Saturday morning, beach campers began to stir early from increased winds. Sawed-off posts keep vehicles from driving into the portion the tidewaters reach. Prudent overnight visitors observe the boundary. Some few fudge a bit by pitching small octagonal tents on slight rises in the restricted zone.

On this particular walk, two emaciated characters, camped on the tide side, stood between two mounds of bedding on a fallen tent by a turned-over dark blue baby buggy. They faced, talking at the same time above the roar of the sea, taking deep, heavy drags on cigarettes.

The only norm in the intimidating, polemic exchange seemed to be seeing that the smokes stayed lighted and the monologues held a steady pitch. Wind whipped their disheveled clothes and sanded their skins, streaking the blue overturned baby buggy in a red sheen.

Incoming tide narrowed the passage to 15 paces; nevertheless, even pulling a strong headwind, passing time was swift. An ol' pal, Doctor Scott Martin, counseled 30 years ago that no social situation exists where a gentleman

or lady cannot ask to be excused. Doc's advice suits me a hundred times out of a hundred.

Hard to remember how long passing by the confrontation lasted. Clearest recollection is speculating that the two were actors rehearsing for a beach drama, like "Uncle Charley and the Sand Fleas," or practicing a jingle for a tobacco company, rhyming "sea breeze breath" with "nicotine clean lungs."

An incident the night before when we heard an old whiskered busker play on a violin fueled my imagination. Fueled his imagination, too. Every time a dollar bill hit his black derby crown, his pat reply was that his father crafted his violin from maple wood for his eighth birthday to the point of making a bow too heavy to saw out any tune except the dreariest German dirges.

The two campers disappeared after then. The blue baby buggy stayed on one side the whole time by a small secured tent. Whoever the two persons were, they must have come in the night and left early of morning. Lots of hombres and dames visit the beach. These two happened to be mysterious cases.